
INTRODUCTION TO HUME'S *DIALOGUES CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION*

Text source:

Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion,
parts 2 and 3

TWO VIEWS OF GOD THAT WERE CURRENT IN HUME'S DAY

■ THEISM

- A perfect being created the world.
- He is actively involved in the course of events in the world, influencing history through miraculous interventions, issuing revelations through prophets and inspired scripture, the answering of prayer, etc.

■ DEISM

- A perfect being created the world.
 - Since He created a perfect world, there is no need for Him to keep tampering with it, or to intervene in its natural laws. The various stories of scripture and prophecy are not credible.
 - We can know about this being through rational inquiry, but not through any alleged sacred text.
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POSSIBLE GROUNDS FOR RELIGIOUS BELIEF

■ (1) FIDEISTIC RELIGION

- Where we disavow all rational justification for our religious beliefs, but believe anyway: a '*leap of faith*' is taken.
 - In the main monotheistic traditions, this first approach is historically not so popular. But it does have some advocates (e.g. *Tertullian, Calvin, Pascal, Kierkegaard*).



POSSIBLE GROUNDS FOR RELIGIOUS BELIEF (*continued*)

■ (2) RATIONAL RELIGION

- Where we provide reasons and arguments for our religious beliefs.

□ (2a) REVEALED RELIGION

- We can know certain religious truths via God's revelations, either DIRECTLY, or INDIRECTLY (= the usual case, where God's revelation is mediated by prophets and/or scripture)
 - Of course, we have to provide arguments for believing that our sources of revelation are indeed authentically divine. Usually this involves (i) the evidence of ***miracles*** as vouching for this authenticity (***Augustine, Aquinas, Locke***); some also argue (ii) from the aesthetic and ethical beauty of scripture.
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POSSIBLE GROUNDS FOR RELIGIOUS BELIEF (*continued*)

□ (2b) NATURAL RELIGION

- We can know certain religious truths through general reason and argument, independently of any actual historical revelation. (*Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke*)
 - E.g. The argument from design, the regress argument to a first cause, the ontological argument etc...
 - Note: Natural religion *alone* would presumably only underwrite a **deistic** sort of belief. To get to **theism**, we'd also need some sort of argument from revealed religion.
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HUME'S TREATMENT OF THESE VARIOUS POSSIBLE GROUNDS

- (1) FIDEISTIC RELIGION

- Barring the odd satirical jibe, Hume largely ignores this.

- (2) RATIONAL RELIGION

- (2a) REVEALED RELIGION

- Hume argues that the testimonial evidence for alleged miracles falls far short of our usual standards for historical evidence. (See ECHU 10)

- (2b) NATURAL RELIGION

- Hume presents a comprehensive critique of the scope and limits of natural religion in the *Dialogues*. He devastates many traditional arguments here, but (arguably) ends up endorsing a (very) threadbare version of natural religion.
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THE THREE CHARACTERS IN HUME'S DIALOGUES

■ DEMA

- Endorses the *a priori* 'first cause' argument for God's existence
- Argues that, while we certainly know that God exists, it is impious to think that we can understand God or to think that he can be conceived in human terms.

■ CLEANTHES

- Advocates the *a posteriori* argument from design for God's existence.
- Argues that we *can* know some things about God's nature (reasoning from the type of Universe He has produced), and that He is like us *in some respects*.

■ PHILO

- Spends most of the *Dialogues* raising problems for natural religion.
 - Says that he believes in God, though the content of this belief turns out to be a very attenuated form of threadbare deism.
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